

**Political Economy as Natural Theology: Smith, Malthus, and Their Followers**

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In Paul Oslington's view, most histories of political economy have got it all wrong. In particular, they fail to notice the important role that theology – and natural theology, specifically – has played in nourishing the field's growth, by lending it both a conceptual framework and an intellectual legitimacy. In *Political Economy as Natural Theology*, Oslington aims to right this wrong by telling an "alternative history" that "writes the neglected theological elements back into the history of the discipline" (p. 2). Bypassing familiar names such as Ricardo and Mill, Oslington focuses instead on roughly a dozen less-known figures, such as Josiah Tucker, J.B. Sumner, and William Whewell.

Fortunately for those of us not yet acquainted with each of these names, Oslington handles his materials deftly, using citations that manage to give readers a sense of how his dons and parson –economists actually thought without drowning them in too much source material. He does so, moreover, while still being admirably concise: all this clocks in at a mere 129 pages (excluding appendices and references). This volume is clearly the fruit of a tremendous amount of research, and Oslington is to be commended for marshaling it in such a clear and compact format.

To set the stage, Oslington begins by distinguishing the British tradition of scientific natural theology from the natural theologies of thinkers such as Anselm and Aquinas, which used reason to demonstrate God's existence. In contrast, the British scientific tradition simply assumed the validity of Christianity, and in particular relied upon the doctrines of providence and creation by a personal God. Instead of being an explicit project of generating proofs, Oslington argues, British natural theology provided an organizing framework for intellectual life that served a range of "non-demonstrative" functions, including legitimating scientific inquiry by giving it a religious purpose, coordinating it through a common language, and even suggesting clues for advancing scientific insight (Oslington gives the example of Newton poring over scriptures while formulating his theories) (pp. 6,7). In the view of these natural theologians, God's providential design of the cosmos, human nature, and

human society not only warranted their inquiry into these subjects but meant that their scientific discoveries had a role to play in “increasing our appreciation of the divine wisdom and leading us to worship” (p. 8). In the case of political economy, this required attention to the role of providence in ordering economic activity, and especially to the place and meaning of economic suffering.

An interest in the relation between self-interest and the common good is immediately apparent in the work of the four figures that Oslington selects to illustrate the early roots of this tradition in English thought: Joseph Butler, Josiah Tucker, William Paley, and Edmund Burke, each of whom went on to influence later political economy both through and apart from Smith. In starting his alternative history here, before Smith, Oslington’s aim is to ground political economy more firmly in its theological background – and, in a certain sense, to decenter Smith himself. In fact, he frames this chapter by asking: Would political economy still have emerged in Britain if Smith had died while a child? After surveying the related intuitions structuring the analyses of these representative figures, Oslington cautiously answers in the affirmative. As a result of the widely shared natural theological framework visible in Butler et al., he suggests, all the pieces were in place for the emergence of a comprehensive political economic framework, and eighteenth-century minds were especially “well prepared” for Smith’s claims about commercial society being coordinated by a providential harmony of interests (p. 27).

Admitting that Smith was still special, even if not entirely *sui generis*, Oslington devotes the next chapter to him, beginning by locating him against a background of moderate Calvinism (also addressed in Oslington, 2011). Among other “test cases” for viewing Smith as operating in this natural theological framework (whatever his personal views), Oslington proposes a reading of the invisible hand as an allusion to “the possibility of special providential divine action in the economic system to guarantee its stability” (p. 39; and also covered in Oslington, 2011). Whereas general providence can be seen in the (mostly) harmonious design of the system itself, it was thought that special – or irregular – providence was sometimes necessary to counterbalance the proximate causal forces that general providence had put into place. Oslington points out that in his *History of Astronomy*, Smith comments on precisely this sort of distinction in Newton’s work, where Newton

suggests that planetary orbits need periodic adjustment. Given Smith's respect for Newton, and the latter's regular discussion of "God moving parts of the universe as parts of a body" – including a mention of a "divine arm" placing planets – Oslington proposes that it is not a stretch to see Smith doing something similar (pp. 43, 39).

This intriguing interpretation both elevates and minimizes the invisible hand within Smith's overall conceptual system. On the one hand (if the reader will pardon the phrase!), it suggests that the hand is ultimately God's. At the same time, it restricts the meaning we can glean from its functioning: in *Wealth of Nations*, this reading indicates that the invisible hand is only operative when Scottish merchants fear the risk of overseas investment and therefore promote Scottish economic development by keeping their capital at home; Oslington is against using the invisible hand in defenses of markets overall.

It's famously hard to know what to make of Smith's uses of this term, and not all readers will be convinced that this interpretation sews up the puzzle (e.g., given that Smith didn't hesitate to opine on the dealings of providence elsewhere, why wouldn't he simply identify the hand as special providence, if that's what he meant?). It is, however, both fascinating and well argued, and deserves a place in future discussions of the topic. This section also stands out as one of the rare occasions where Oslington offers his own views on what is at stake with regard to our appropriation of the material he covers, and is by that token one of the most engaging and memorable portions of the book.

After Smith, Oslington's alternative history skips over Mill, Ricardo, and Bentham, lingering instead on Dugald Stewart, J.B. Sumner, and Thomas Chalmers, on the grounds that although these have "received much less attention," they had a "huge impact on popular thinking and economic policy" (p. 60). Here, Oslington's especial concern is to highlight how these latter two developed Malthus' theodicy. While Oslington's own engagement with these theodicies is restrained, here it begins to become clear just how much of a problem economic suffering posed to the success of political economy's function as natural theology. In the following chapter, he shows how the scholars who established political economy in English universities, including Nassau Senior, Richard Whately, John Henry Newman, and William Whewell, continued to worry at the problem in the nineteenth century, again without resolving it. More than their predecessors, these figures also seemed to

feel a growing unease about the relationship of theology and political economy and took great pains to explain the proper role of faith and doctrine in political economic analysis.

Oslington's final chapter turns to narrating the demise of natural theology, and connects this with the separation of economics from theology. His proposal here is that both developments were driven by the tradition's ultimate inability to generate an adequate theodicy. Naturally, the rise of political economy had changed the conversation about poverty, suggesting for the first time that it was "both explicable and remediable" (p. 113). To the extent that natural theology was expected to illustrate the goodness of God, its practitioners' failures to reconcile economic suffering with a providential plan thus placed it in "deep trouble" (p. 113). Furthermore, Oslington points out, extending natural theology into political economy had also rendered it much more "politically charged":

Arguments by theological political economists about inequality of ranks, land rents as a bountiful gift of nature and starvation of those at the bottom being part of God's design, stirred up political controversy in a way that arguments about the arrangement of the planets could not. (p. 113)

Here Oslington's history ends: backed into a corner by its own expectations, the tradition of natural theology had nowhere to go, and, in turn, political economy had nothing further to gain from viewing itself as theological. From thence forward, even political economists personally motivated by pious wonder ceased to frame their scientific inquiry as attempts to explain providence.

In an all too brief conclusion, Oslington offers five lessons from surveying this rewritten history: "integration is potentially powerful"; although approaches that reduce one discipline to the other are "unhelpful"; one ought to "engage with the mainstream," as did the British natural theologians; the "political and pastoral dimensions" of relating the disciplines are very important; and finally, "theology has nothing to fear from economics, neither has economics anything to fear from theology" (pp. 127–128). While each could be a useful prompt for reflection, the list feels hastily cobbled together, and no lesson is given more than two sentences. As the conclusion to a volume of such thorough and careful scholarship, it leaves the reader feeling a bit let down.

As a theologian, I particularly wish that Oslington had reflected further on what we can learn from considering the varieties – and above all, the failures – of the theologies of providence he chronicled. This is arguably *the* driving theological concern of the book: if I understand this alternative history correctly, it claims that political economy arose in no small part as an attempt to explain the workings of commercial society as providential, and became economics when it found that it could not.

Oslington's concluding claim, that theology has nothing to fear from economics and vice versa, is thus not entirely in keeping with the declensionist tone of his preceding chapters, where the expectations on each side all but ensured their eventual incompatibility. (Indeed, it seems to me that an alternative title for the book could have been *Political Economy as Natural Theology: Why It Won't Work.*)

The direction this naturally pushes us in is to ask how we can avoid arriving at such an impasse again. One obvious answer might be to simply abandon the natural theological approach, and with it the aim of illustrating God's goodness using economics. Interestingly, this does not appear to be Oslington's own response: in addition to his lightly appreciative tone throughout, his conclusion speculates that the variety of natural theology currently reemerging within philosophy "may be fruitful in relation to economics" (p. 128). But how should we go about establishing this relation (whether the theology in question is natural or otherwise), now that the disciplines are distinct? Is the lesson to be learned from this episode that theodicy itself is a dead end, and this time both parties should steer clear of discussing providence altogether, focusing instead on different themes – such as justice, perhaps, or anthropology? Or, is it that certain approaches to theodicy are doomed to failure but that others might be more rewarding?

This last question is obviously of interest for those hoping to promote healthy dialogue between economics and theology. However, in light of Robert Nelson's argument that economics often functions like a religion – including by offering its own explanatory accounts of suffering (e.g. 2000, and 1994 especially on theodicy) – we might ask it of economics, as well. Can the alternative history Oslington has unearthed here give us fresh insight into what to make of theodicy-like elements of economic discourse, both academic and popular?

Admittedly, it may be unfair to expect answers to such expansively normative questions from a book whose primary aim is strictly

historical – and, for that matter, which more than succeeds in that aim. *Political Economy as Natural Theology* is an impressive work of scholarship, and utterly convincing with regard to its argument that a theological framework suffused early political economy. Perhaps we ought not complain too much, then, if Oslington has left the task of critically reflecting on that framework largely up to us.

### References

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